Re-Visioning for the City of Milpitas, CA
Identity and Positive Transformation through Urban Design

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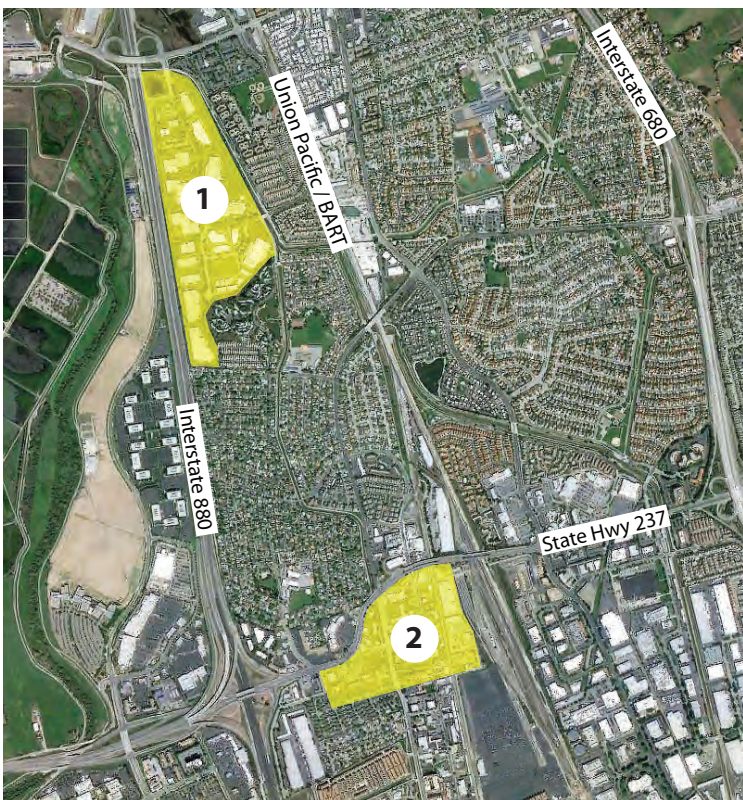
In the fall 2013, BCRP's third-year urban design studio engaged in a successful visioning process for two sites in the City of Milpitas. Discussed here by two participants from this class –a student and a faculty member– the resulting set of projects were fully embraced by city officials and captured two local awards and one state award from the American Planning Association in 2014.

In September 2013, the City of Milpitas Planning and Neighborhood Services Department contracted Cal Poly's City and Regional Planning Department to develop pre-planning insights and urban design concepts for the California Circle and Main Street at Serra areas (Figure 1). Both were seen as important development opportunities to help Milpitas develop a new identity and sense of place in the region. The task was undertaken by BCRP's third-year urban design studio, directed by Professors Vicente del Rio and Hemalata Dandekar, and overseen by Steven McHarris and Scott Ruhland, respectively planning director and senior planner with the City of Milpitas. The class engaged 29 energetic students who turned their skills and creative imaginations to devising a desirable future for these key sites. All products from this class process and the final student proposals and video simulations are available from the City of Milpitas Planning and Neighborhood Services Department's website.*

Milpitas, California is home to approximately 70,000 people – the majority of whom are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Asia and Latin America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Many of these immigrants came seeking a job in the technological industry of Silicon Valley. While still part of Santa Clara County, Milpitas is located at its very northern edge and lies within the dominating shadow of San Jose and Santa Clara. Milpitas has struggled to gain industry and employment within its city limits, as well as entertainment and civic attractions. Competition with surrounding cities has hindered Milpitas from moving beyond a "bedroom community" for Silicon Valley.

The first project area, known as California Circle, lies at the intersection of Interstate 880 and Dixon Landing Road, at the northern tip of Milpitas. Currently zoned industrial-commercial and largely under-utilized, its 110 acres have a strong potential to become an important gateway due to its high visibility and easy access. The second project area, of approximately 60 acres, includes the intersection of Main Street and Serra Way, in Milpitas' historic core. This site also enjoys excellent accessibility but is currently a hodgepodge of commercial development of different types, ages, and maintenance levels. Both project areas were chosen for their potential to bring about catalytic, transformative impacts in the City of Milpitas; stimulating changes within the city and generating activity nodes to serve the residents and attract new regional economic opportunities. In addition, new visual and physical imagery could inspire new identities for both sites and a new image for Milpitas, representing the city as a new regional destination.

Figure 1: California Circle (1) and Main at Serra (2), project areas in Milpitas.



* Material available from the City of Milpitas Planning Division at <http://www.ci.milpitas.ca.gov/government/planning/special_projects.asp>

The Design Process

The quarter-long design process included three phases and ten steps, including background research, fieldwork, SWOT analysis, project development, fly-through 3D simulations, and student reports (Figure 2). The final step was completed in January when all the work was combined into a final report and presented to the Milpitas City Council.

Phase 1: Understanding the Problem

This first phase included four steps: analysis of existing documents, field survey, site assessment with SWOT analysis, and the analysis of relevant case studies. Organized into seven teams, the students started the quarter by studying available material on Milpitas (history, market, general trends, etc.), as well as local planning documents such as the General Plan, the Streetscape, Trails, Bikeways, and Parks and Recreation master plans, and various specific plans.

On September 27, the class traveled to Milpitas for a two-day study trip. After a presentation by the city staff on various planning issues pertaining to Milpitas and the project sites, planning staff took the class to visit nearby successful redevelopment efforts: Mountain View's and Sunnyvale's downtowns, and San Jose's Santana Row. Being accompanied in the visits by the Milpitas planning director and the senior planner was of great advantage to the class as important planning and design issues unfolded constantly. The first day ended with a visit to both project sites.

On the second day, the student teams engaged in windshield and on-foot surveys of the entire city and the two project sites. Students documented city and neighborhood aspects under four major headings: imageability, legibility, accessibility, and sense of community. Moreover, the teams investigating the project sites utilized a specially designed lot survey form for intensive data collection of every lot. This included: current uses, maintenance aspects, photographs of buildings, and other relevant attributes.

After returning to Cal Poly and analyzing the information from the fieldwork and the data collected so far, the class engaged in a SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis for the project sites covering man-made, natural, cultural, economic, and social-political resources. Together with site assessment maps, this effort revealed the positive and negative factors affecting the sites' development potentials.

The highly visible California Circle project site is located in the north of the city, bounded by Highway 880 (west), Dixon Landing Road (north), and the Berryessa Creek (east). It is directly served by ramps connecting the highway to Dixon Landing Road which leads to Interstate 680 (another important north-south connection) located in the east. The area, currently designated as an Industrial Park, measures 110 acres and includes a hotel, a gas station, and several industrial buildings

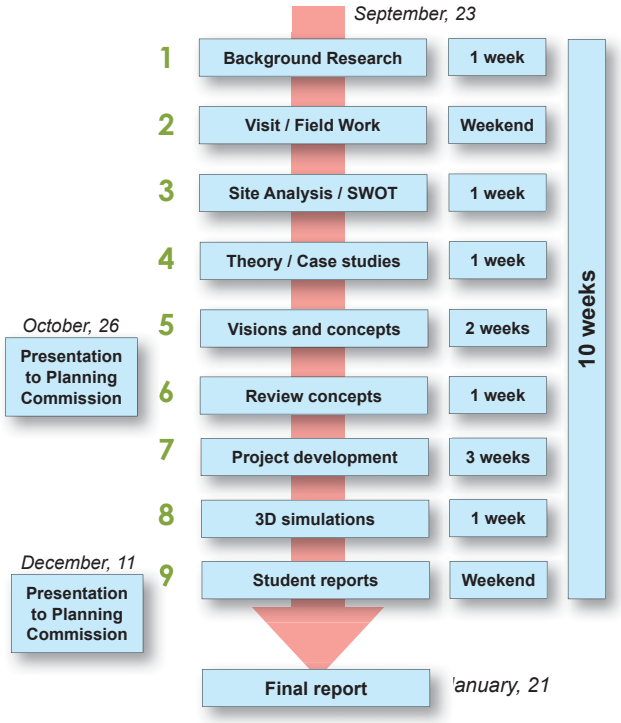


Figure 2: The quarter-long design process.

of which approximately 32% are vacant. It is surrounded by residential land uses except to the west across Highway 880 where an industrial park area currently holds agricultural uses and the city's sewage pump station. The San Jose sewage treatment plant is located nearby, also west of Highway 880, and odors are clearly discernable in the California Circle project site due to the dominant winds. A commercial developer had bought two lots there and proposed a single-family closed community. The Milpitas planning department was opposing the community until a specific plan could be approved for the whole area, for which the department counted on the ideas from the Cal Poly studio.

The 60-acre Main at Serra site is located in Milpitas' Midtown district and includes the city's historic core, of which there are practically no remnants. To the east, the project area is bound by the strong barrier represented by railroad tracks, patios and facilities. A ramp from Interstate Highway 880 leads directly onto West Calaveras Boulevard (California Highway 237) that holds one of the few bridges over the railroad lines. Calaveras Boulevard leads to the Milpitas Government Center and Interstate 680 on the East. This project area is also well below its development potential as it holds several outdated shopping centers, commercial and office buildings, as well as various under-utilized lots. It also holds a variety of popular ethnic restaurants, several religious temples, and a well-attended Indian movie theatre. Accessibility is excellent, particularly from Interstate 880, but limited from the east due to the railroad, and soon a BART station that will be built nearby to

provide public transportation (although the exact site for the station had not been decided yet). Walkability is low and the existing Midtown Specific Plan needs updating and better detailing in the study area.

Following the site analysis, student teams selected case studies according to their relevance to the two project sites and the Milpitas situation. All cases represented successful urban design interventions in the United States. They were analyzed according to the seven qualities for good place-making as proposed by Ian Bentley and colleagues in their book, *Responsive Environments - A Manual for Designers*: permeability, variety, legibility, robustness, visual appropriateness, richness, and personalization. The case-studies included: City Place (West Palm Beach, FL), Mizner Park (Boca Raton, FL), Downtown Brea (Brea, CA), Uptown District (San Diego, CA), The Grove (Los Angeles, CA), Santana Row (San Jose, CA), and Valencia Town Center (Valencia, CA).

Some of the important lessons taken from analysing these projects were the need for mixed use and pedestrian-centric environments that attract community through vibrant and high-density design, accessible public space, unique features and identity, recognition of the history of the community, the importance of development "anchors" (such as a key institutions, amenities, or land-use), and the idea of having a theme or identity for the project.

Phase 2: Concept Development

This phase included developing vision statements, objectives, design ideas, and preliminary concept diagrams, as well as a basic development program for the project areas. The work was developed within a framework of seven design principles derived from Ian Bentley's approach to good place-making (as noted above).

Mixing hand-drawn and digital techniques, the teams developed their unique preliminary visions and ideas, using report, poster, and PowerPoint formats. On October 26, the class traveled to Milpitas and presented to the Planning Commission and staff in a special session open to the public. Assessment forms were distributed in the session so that, in addition to the oral comments, the class could collect written statements of likes, dislikes and the most appealing aspects of each team's concepts.

As suggested by city staff, the concepts were centered on sense of place, walkability, and sustainability, but differed in their modes of achieving them. Concept elements perceived as most appealing by the Planning Commissioners included: thinking of the project as gateways, traffic calming measures, a high-tech "walk" and a tech museum, the rejuvenation of the creek and a creek walk, a water park, a performing arts center, a cultural and community center, an international movie theater, outdoor gathering areas, a restaurant row, a hotel complex and a convention center.

The Planning Commission was especially pleased with students' attention to incorporating Milpitas' diverse history and culture into the designs; as well as the students ideas for creating an identify for, and unifying the City of Milpitas. The feedback was very positive and helpful, and provided students with further direction on creativity, aesthetic quality, functionality, and feasibility. The posters with the visions and concepts from all seven teams remained at the Planning Commission's meeting room with full access for the public.

Phase 3: Project Development

This last phase started with a discussion of comments received during their first presentation in Milpitas, and a critique by planning director Steve MacHarris and senior planner Scott Ruhland during a visit to our Cal Poly studio. The next steps included creating a final development program (all land uses and buildings proposed, their square footages, and parking provided), illustrative site plans, sections, and computer-based 3D renderings and simulations in both project areas, and reports and posters from all seven student teams. The three-dimensional models and digital fly-through simulations of each concept were particularly important in communicating the final urban design visions and the enhanced sense of place and pedestrian appropriateness.

The work was presented to the City of Milpitas Planning Commission on December 11 and concluded with a report and video that documents the process and design concepts of the students. Following the students' presentations of their ideas, the chair of the city's planning commission declared: "This is your world, your future, and I hope we can see these visions become a reality here in Milpitas." His words summed up well his and the commission's satisfaction with the proposals for more walkable, memorable, and sustainable environments in Milpitas where people would enjoy to live, work, and visit.

The class presented a total of three proposals for the California Circle area, and four for the Main at Serra area. The proposals included the following key elements:

California Circle Area:

The Waterview Plaza (by S. Benzel, M. Johnson, H. Shimer, E. Vargas, and A. Zanmiller) is an innovative, attractive, mixed-use, and pedestrian friendly development, designed to establish a new image of Milpitas for the 21st century (Figures 3 & 4). It embodies a multi-dimensional transition from gray to green, focusing on technology, sustainability, and community providing desirable amenities for patrons, Milpitas residents, and visitors. This project will establish Milpitas as a leader in forward-thinking development and signify the start of a new history for the city. This proposal retains the gas station and hotel currently located next to the off-ramp from Interstate 880, and brings in a new waterpark next to the existing creek as the most significant element at the site's entrance. Most of the area will become an environmentally friendly technology park

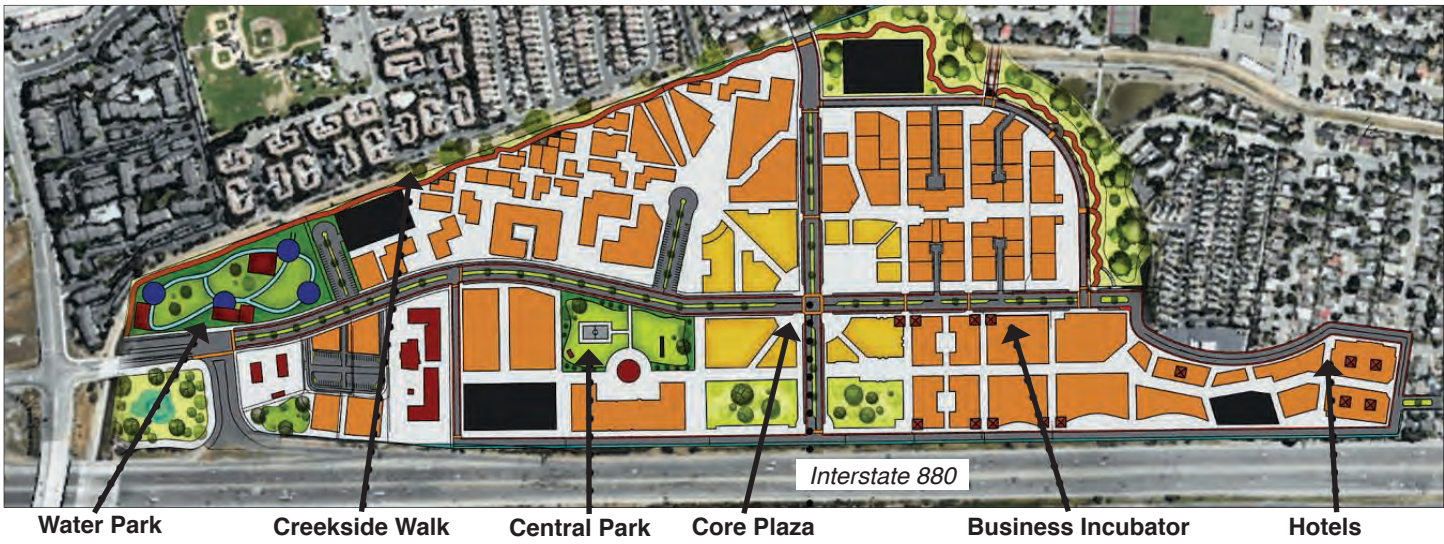


Figure 3: Illustrative site plan showing the major elements of the Waterview Plaza at California Circle.

with mixed-use components. The design highlights a central plaza surrounded by retail-oriented uses, a business incubator, a creek walk with a linear park, and a new hotel.

The Cosmo Center (by J. Bonilla, S. Coleman, J. Ha and M. Sheikhali) is a pedestrian-friendly mixed-use development located at the "crossroads of Silicon Valley" (Figures 5 & 6). It augments the surrounding community by providing inviting features, landmarks, housing, and space for commercial, hi-tech, and recreational uses. The project provides an accessible, culturally rich, and a livable environment that is a destination for both visitors and Milpitas residents by creating a live-work-play complex attractive to the local multicultural, technology rich community. This proposal's major design features are: an open air amphitheater as a gateway; a central roundabout with a sculpture/fountain; a cultural complex; parking structures with animated facades as buffers from the freeway; the Milpitas Tech Museum; residential over platforms with retail and parking; townhomes along the creek park; a planted median and bike lanes along California Circle; and parking structures along a frontage road with access and egress from the freeway.

The Circle (by T. Bertwistle, A. Perez, S. Severon and Y. Way) is a vibrant community bustling with recreational, educational, and culturally rich venues to explore (Figures 7 & 8). It will serve as a premiere destination for ethnic cuisine, artistic expression, shopping, and entertainment. The Circle will continually transform itself to resonate the spirit of its diverse community setting at any given time. Designed to fit the needs of nearby residents and tourists, California Circle will offer plenty of unique experiences and be an attractive destination to visit. The most important design features of The Circle are: a large central plaza with an amphitheater, space for community events, and a farmers market; terraced parks radiating from the central plaza up to the height of the levy along the creek; a creek walk.

Figure 4: Entrance to the water park in the Waterview Plaza.

Figure 5: The mixed-use boulevard at the Cosmo Center.

Figure 6: Illustrative site plan of the Cosmo Center proposal for the California Circle area.

Figure 7: 3D model showing land-uses in The Circle project.

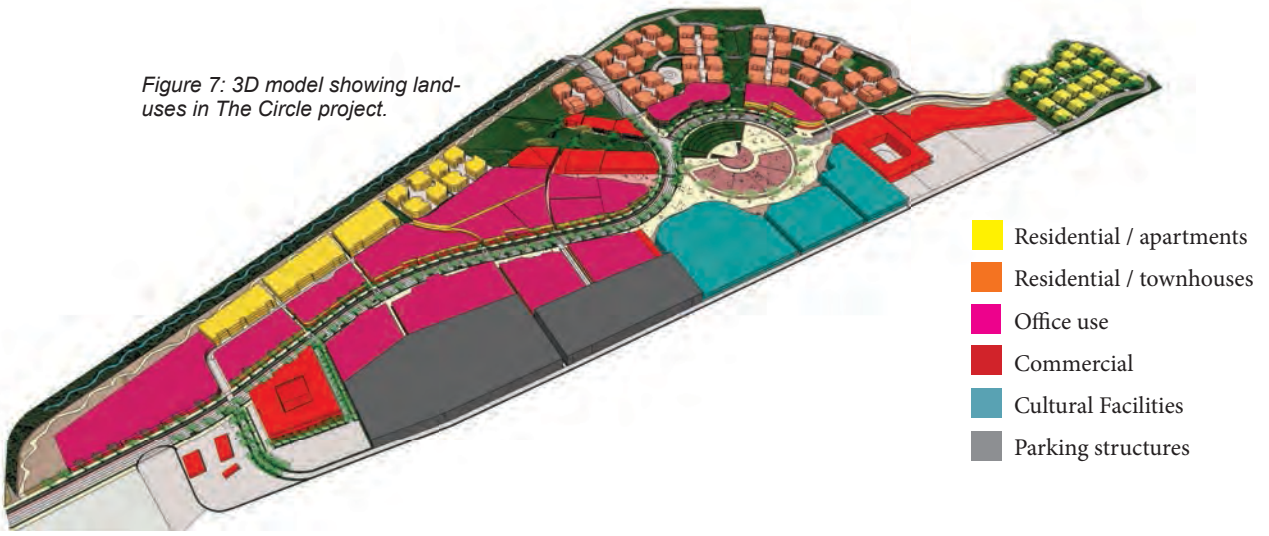


Figure 8: View of the townhouses, retail, and park in The Circle.

Main at Serra Area

The Main Connection (by C. Caruso, E. Granger, E. Merino and K. Van Leeuwen) celebrates the history of Milpitas and its cultural richness while focusing on the creation of a cohesive downtown area (Figure 9). A semi-circular plaza will mark a gateway into Serra Way from the freeway, bordered by an international movie theater and a cultural history museum. The project has an emphasis on the pedestrian scale with traffic calming measures, friendly streetscapes, and outdoor public spaces. At the terminus of Serra Way at Main Street are a traffic circle and a plaza. A mural depicting the history of Milpitas will mark the core of the Midtown District. A new pedestrian bridge over the train tracks connects the currently divided East and West Milpitas. Zoning will emphasize mixed-use development with various forms of housing, commercial, and office uses.

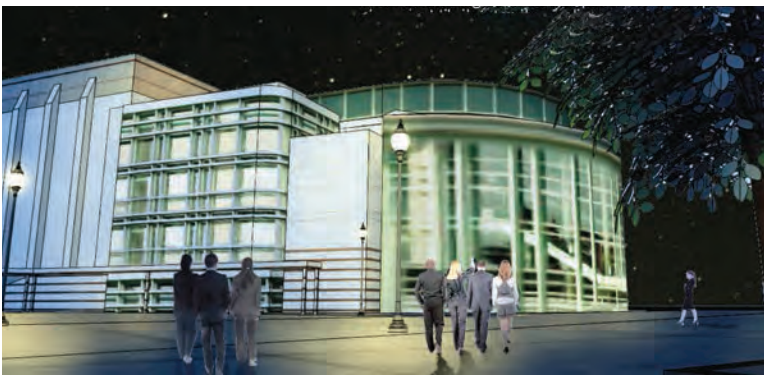
Figure 9: 3D view of land-uses volumes at The Main Connection. In the foreground the Cultural Museum and the semi-circular plaza with retail and the international movie theatres.

The Core (by K. Alcantara, C. Bedekovic, J. Kim and D. Tran) is a mixed use, LEED certified neighborhood development in the heart of Milpitas (Figure 10). The project will give Milpitas a sense of identity and community by creating a walkable and aesthetically pleasing environment. The project focuses on increasing and maximizing the pedestrian experience through linkages and the permeability of ground floor uses. The very connected new grid will feature the following major design elements: restoring the creek and implementing linear park features; a gateway at Serra Way; a state-of-the-art convention center and hotel at West Calaveras Boulevard with easy access from I-880; an Art District with a plaza and an art center; a residential hotel; an iconic building with a multi-screen movie theater at the terminus of Serra Way at Main Street.

The Hotspot (by A. Marston, D. Oreizi, M. Paul, and S. Wood) is a retail-based district that emphasizes walkability and connectivity, attracting both the Milpitas community and those living in the surrounding cities (Figures 11 & 12). It provides for a strong commercial anchor, a state-of-the-art performing arts center, a community center, a "high-tech walk" over commercial and retail buildings between Main Street and the railroad tracks, residential buildings and open space public facilities on a platform over commercial and retail uses at the sidewalks level, and a system of open public spaces, wide sidewalks, and pedestrian promenades.

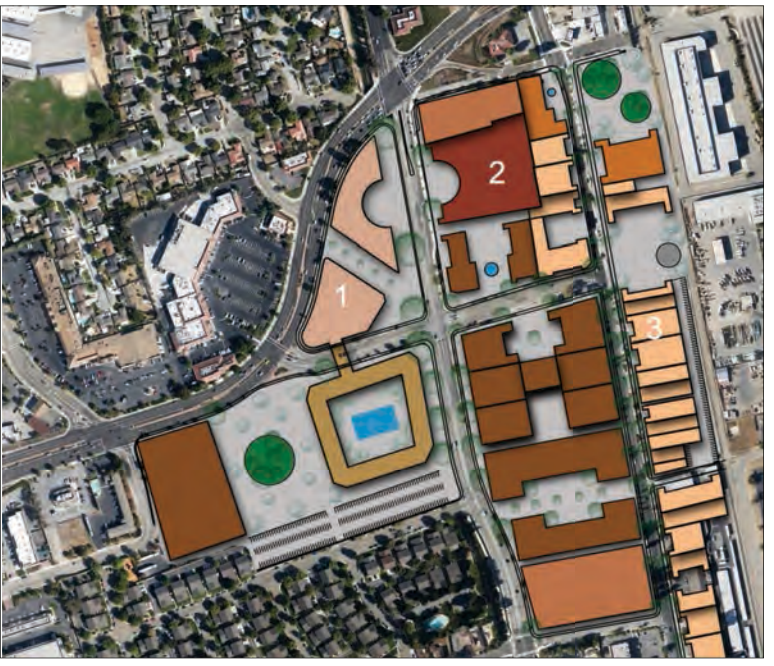
Milpitas Main (by M. Ammari, C. Carlucci, R. Kramer, and L. Osterhus) is a tech savvy and cultural hub conveniently located within Silicon Valley for residents and visitors to experience a rich cultural environment (Figure 13). The three catalysts of the proposal are a hotel and convention center, an interactive cultural center, and a restaurant row. The hotel and the convention center are connected by a bridge over Serra Way, providing a visual gateway for those exiting the I-880 into West Calaveras. An interactive cultural center, directly across from a new movie theatre, provides educational opportunities for residents and visitors. A restaurant row along Main Street will

Figure 10: 3D model of land-uses and volumes in The Core proposal. Note the convention center and hotel at the foreground and linear park along a revitalized creek.



Figures 11 & 12: Conceptual views of a pedestrian row (above) and the Performing Arts Center (below), the major anchor proposed for The Hot Spot. Project by by A. Marston, D. Oreizi, M. Paul, and S. Wood.

Figure 13: Milpitas at Main project showing the hotel and convention center (1), the cultural center (2) and the Restaurant Row (3).



concentrate an array of ethnic cuisines, groceries stores, and public open spaces in a walkable environment, celebrating Milpitas' history and diversity.

Final Remarks

The final step in the process was taken over by instructors Vicente del Rio and Hemalata Dandekar, who combined all the material from the various phases into a final report and PowerPoint presentation; which they delivered to the Milpitas City Council at their normal public session on January 21, 2014. All levels of city officials praised the hard work and creativity of this third year undergraduate studio.

Planning Director Steve MacHarris was very happy with the quality of the final work, the many possibilities explored for both sites, and what the possibilities represent for Milpitas. City Manager Tom Williams thanked the class and the city staff for the outstanding work done generating great ideas for the city's future. Mayor Esteves was grateful for the students' efforts. He noted how all visions maximized the land use on both sites, making it easier to work with both owners and developers, and appreciated information about how to fund the specific projects. Councilmember Giordano remarked on the innovation, freshness, and newness that she witnessed in the presentation.

For Milpitas, one of the biggest advantages of having students work on these projects was that they brought in fresh eyes that were uncompromised with any particular stakeholder's view, although cognizant of them. Students were able to gather these different views into creative urban design visions with innovative solutions and possibilities for consideration by the city planning staff, policy makers, and investors alike when exploring development in the California Circle and Main Street at Serra areas. The seven project alternatives provided a rich tapestry of possible interventions that can, with creative mixing and matching, lead Milpitas into feasible, successful scenarios that are walkable, sustainable, and generate new identities for the city.

The students' Urban Design Visions for Milpitas were accepted by the city for further consideration as the two sites are soon going to be the object of specific and precise plans that will define their future development. All the material that resulted from this work process has been uploaded to the "special projects" section of the Planning and Neighborhood Services Department webpage. The Milpitas planning staff decided to take into their hands the task of submitting our work to the 2014 American Planning Association Awards, resulting in Academic Awards of Excellence from both the Northern and the Central Coast sections, and an Award of Merit at the state level.